



NEWS RELEASE

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Operation ‘Wild Web’ Targets Illegal, Online Sale of Endangered Species and Parts from Protected Animals

LOS ANGELES – An undercover operation dubbed “Wild Web” today resulted in charges against six Southern California residents who are accused of selling endangered species and animal parts, including pelts taken from wild cats, through online auction sites such as Craigslist.

The charges contained in five criminal cases filed in United States District Court in Los Angeles stem from an investigation coordinated by the United States Fish & Wildlife Service and which involved investigators and prosecutors across the United States and in three Southeast Asian countries.

Operation Wild Web was designed to disrupt the trafficking of illegal wildlife on the Internet. Across the United States, the Wild Web task force conducted more than 150 undercover purchases of endangered wildlife over the course of two weeks last August (see: <http://www.fws.gov/home/newsroom/operationwildwebNR07112013.html>). Investigators posing as buyers focused on endangered or protected wildlife, as well as invasive species that threaten the native fish species in the United States.

The five cases filed in Los Angeles this morning charge six defendants with violations of federal environmental laws. The defendants charged are:

- Hanna Karim, 44, and his wife, Margarita Licomitros, 36, both of Huntington Beach, who are accused of selling a Sumatran Tiger skin for \$8,000 after the item was advertised on Craigslist. Karim and Licomitros are charged with offering an endangered species for sale, and, if convicted, each could be sent to federal

prison for up to one year. Tigers are critically endangered throughout the world, with estimates that there are less than 500 Sumatran tigers remaining in the wild. This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Rupa S. Goswami, (213) 894-5486.

- Rene De La Peza, 42, of Hacienda Heights, who is accused of selling a jaguar skin for \$15,000 after advertising the item on Craigslist. De La Peza is charged with offering an endangered species for sale and, if convicted, could be sent to federal prison for up to one year. Jaguars, the largest cat found in the Americas, have been listed as endangered for 40 years. This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Rupa S. Goswami, (213) 894-5486.
- Michael Roy McIntire, 59, of Encino, who is accused of selling three migratory bird mounts in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. If convicted, McIntire would face up to six months in prison. All migratory birds – such as the birds involved in this case: a canvasback, a cinnamon teal and a mallard – are protected under treaties between the United States, Russia, Canada and Mexico, and even legally hunted birds cannot be sold. This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Amanda Bettinelli, (213) 894-0470.
- Rodrigo Macedo, 29, of Hesperia, who is accused of selling two Western Scrub Jays in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a charge that carries a maximum penalty of six months in federal prison. This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Amanda Bettinelli, (213) 894-0470.
- Lewis Keister, 42, a resident of the Hancock Park district of Los Angeles and the owner of East Meets West Antiques on La Brea Avenue, who is charged with a felony offense of illegally trafficking wildlife for allegedly selling a pair of seal fur moccasins for \$750 last August. The complaint affidavit also alleges that he sold three Native American dolls, one said to be made of whale bone, and three bags, one made of seal fur, to an undercover agent last December. If convicted of violating the Lacey Act, Keister would face a maximum possible penalty of five years in prison. This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Amanda Bettinelli, (213) 894-0470. This case was investigated by the

National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's Office of Law Enforcement.

All six defendants will be summoned to appear for arraignments in United States District Court on August 8.

As part of Operation Wild Web, state and federal prosecutors across the nation have filed well over 100 criminal cases, with most of the cases being filed in California, Texas and Florida. In addition to the animals and animal parts involved in the cases filed in federal court in Los Angeles, Operation Wild Web led to cases involving the illegal sale of a bear skin and a walking catfish that were filed by the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office. Other cases resulting from Operation Wild Web – involving native wildlife and invasive species, such as live piranha – were recently filed by the Orange County District Attorney's Office, the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office, and the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office. Seven cases were charged in Thailand and Indonesia where animals and parts of animals – such as leopards, tigers, Great Hornbills and Javan eagles – were sold through the Internet.

Law enforcement authorities were assisted by several non-profit organizations that donated resources to the operation, including the Humane Society of the United States, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, and the Freeland Foundation. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations – Wildlife Enforcement Network organized the law enforcement efforts in Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore, where it is working to stop the wildlife trade in source countries in Southeast Asia.